

Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Annual Report

2021-2022

Somerville



Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee

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Committee Members

Current Community Representatives

Ted Alexander

Ginny Alverson (*former Vice Chair*)

Caroline Bodager

Meredith Brown

Thomas Coen

Laura Evans

Christopher Ferry

Vitor Pamplona (*Vice Chair*)

Zach Rosenberg (*former Chair*)

Alessandra Seiter (*Chair*)

Carole Voulgaris (*Secretary*)

Kirsten Walters

Ex Officio

Lauren Craik (*OSPCD - Mobility*)

Justin Schreiber (*OSPCD - Mobility*)

Beatriz Gómez Mouakad (*City Council*)

Former Community Representatives

Jessica Bellow (*2021*)

Jessica Ferguson (*2021*)

Rauvin Johl (*2021*)

Paola Massoli (*2021*)

Mary Napolitano (*2022*)

Audrey Orenstein (*2022; former Secretary*)

Julia Toof (*2022*)

Emily Vides (*2022*)

Letter from the Chair

2021 and 2022 were huge years for pedestrian safety and transit access in Somerville. The City installed far more quick-build and permanent traffic calming treatments than ever before, advanced several mobility improvement and streetscape projects, completed two landmark studies, and enacted numerous pedestrian- and transit-friendly policies and programs. We also saw notable safety improvements made on the state-owned roads within our city limits. These activities represent enormous strides in creating a safe, enjoyable experience for street users of all modes, ages, and abilities in Somerville. But 2022 is an unforgettable year above all else thanks to our expanded, hard-won access to the regional transit network. The opening of the Green Line Extension comes after decades of redundant studies, funding shortfalls, lawsuits and, most importantly, undying community activism. Somerville's refusal to let the GLX remain a mere idea is one of the clearest testaments to just how much of a priority effective and equitable public transit is to those who call our city home. Since joining PTAC, working alongside community members like this who are dedicated to safe, usable, and sustainable streets for all has been one of my greatest joys and means of hope.

Some other highlights from the past two years include:

- Significant quick-build and permanent mobility improvements made to Powder House Circle, College Avenue, and Holland Street, including enhancements to the Holland Street design following the tragic crash that killed cyclist Stephen Conley.
- Designs progressed for street/sidewalk reconstruction and mobility improvements on Pearl Street and Western Washington Street, and construction set to begin on the intersection of Powder House Boulevard and Alewife Brook Parkway.
- Early-action measures taken to improve pedestrian safety along Route 28 (McGrath Highway/Fellsway) and Route 38 (Mystic Avenue), including signalized and raised crosswalks, accessible curb ramps, and medians.
- Dozens of speed humps, 20 MPH safety zones, and daylighting measures rolled out across the city, and accessible curb ramps installed in Davis Square.

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- Transit Benefits Program launched for the 2022-2023 school year to provide M7 Student Passes for all Somerville Public School students and 1,200 Monthly passes for parents and guardians.
 - Final Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study and Draft Bicycle Network Plan released to comprehensively review and rethink how our streets are used.
 - Two proposals released for the first system-wide redesign of the MBTA's bus network in over a century, set to increase service across the region by 25% and - as of the revised proposal - within Somerville by 32%.

The years' low points, though, mean that our city and region must continue building on the work outlined above in order to reach our goals of zero traffic fatalities and a reliable transportation system for all. While crashes statewide have been generally decreasing since 2012¹, the past two years have been the deadliest for pedestrians in over a decade. Somerville's crash statistics thankfully paint a more progressive picture, with only 4% of crashes in Somerville involving pedestrians in 2021 and 2022². But, especially when we remember the devastating fatality of Leah Zallman in 2021, those 54 crashes are 54 too many.

Beyond crashes, the simultaneous shutdowns of the MBTA's Orange Line and northern Green Line in August 2022 signal an urgent need to reinvest in what can and should be a world-class rapid transit system. The Orange Line train car fire earlier this year provided immediate impetus for the shutdown, to be sure. But more critically, it laid bare decades of political decisions to saddle the MBTA with debt while expecting the agency to be financially self-sustaining and revenue-neutral. A functional, reliable, and equitable public transit system is critical to our region's environmental, economic, and interpersonal wellbeing. We must keep pushing towards this vision while celebrating the huge wins we've already achieved with the GLX and beyond.

PTAC is three years old as of January 2023. The rest of this report will delve into our activities and accomplishments over the second two years of the committee's existence. This work has taught us boatloads (bus-loads?) about how our City functions, how to organize ourselves, and just how many opportunities there are to make our streets safer.

¹ Excludes 2020 as an anomalous year because of COVID-19 isolation measures.

² MassDOT: Crash Data Portal. <https://apps.impact.dot.state.ma.us/cdp/dashboard-view/26>.

We would not have been able to do any of this work without the expertise and generosity of City staff in the Mobility division, the uncompromising visions of Somerville's many safe streets advocacy groups, the experiential insights of countless community members, and, of course, the over 20 talented representatives who have served on PTAC since its inception.

With warmth and solidarity,

Alessandra Seiter

Chair of the Somerville Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

Areas of Activity

Focus Area: MBTA Bus Network Redesign

As part of the MBTA's ongoing Better Bus Project, the agency is undertaking the first system-wide redesign of the MBTA's bus network in over a century. The MBTA plans to increase bus service by 25%, with a focus on providing 95,000 residents of color and 29,000 low-income households with access to high-frequency service (defined as a bus arriving every 15 minutes or better). Providing feedback on this project has proven to be one of our most impactful areas of activity over the past two years.

In May 2022, the MBTA released an initial proposed network map. While PTAC was supportive of the project's broad goals, we were disappointed that the initial proposed network only promised to increase bus service within Somerville by 4% above pre-COVID levels. After several committee meetings including one with an MBTA representative and direct engagement with Somerville community members, PTAC released a comment letter on the initial proposed network. We encouraged the MBTA to maintain a direct connection between Davis and Union Squares, create a direct connection between Winter Hill and Davis Square, prioritize connections to GLX stations, make the 90 a high-frequency route down Highland Avenue, and create additional north-south connections. Mayor Katjana Ballantyne included several of these points in her own letter on the initial proposed network. Beyond these letters, community members submitted over 6,400 public comments about proposed route changes in the Somerville/Charlestown subarea, comprising over one-third of the 20,000 total comments the MBTA received.

In November 2022, the MBTA released a revised network map. While maintaining a 25% increase in bus service across the region, the revised network addressed nearly all of the concerns raised in our initial comment letter. We continue to push for a high-frequency 90 and a non-isolated Mystic Avenue, but the MBTA's meaningful engagement with the outpouring of feedback from Somerville community members was quite heartening. After releasing our much more positive letter on the revised network map, PTAC received community recognition including from Somerville City Councilor Jake Wilson:

“I’m really encouraged by the progress from the first draft to the second draft of the Bus Network Redesign and this is in large part due to the efforts by folks like PTAC.” - Jake Wilson, Somerville City Councilor

PTAC’s work on the MBTA Bus Network Redesign also proved to be one of the most gratifying for individual committee members:

“Our comment letters on the MBTA Bus Network Redesign provided a holistic community perspective on how to serve Somerville’s varied transit needs and to elevate that perspective to the MBTA.” - Thomas Coen, PTAC Community Representative

“I think/hope that engaging directly with MBTA representatives with regards to the Better Bus Project helped to shape the revisions that they made to vastly improve transit changes within Somerville. I hope we’ll have similar opportunities to engage directly with decision-makers on a variety of relevant issues in the future.” - Meredith Brown, PTAC Community Representative

PTAC was hardly the only group of community members making our voices heard on the MBTA Bus Network Redesign, and it is in large part due to that broad outpouring that so many requested changes made it into the revised network map. The ability to amplify fellow community voices while engaging directly with transportation officials in Somerville and beyond is one of the primary opportunities of an advisory group like PTAC.

Letters

Over the past two years PTAC wrote seven letters (an average of one every three months) on pedestrian and transit matters at the city, regional, and state level. PTAC devoted significant commitment and analysis to these letters, including independent research, subcommittee work, committee discussions and votes, and stakeholder engagement.

One 2020 letter worth mentioning is the one PTAC wrote [supporting an increase in funding for the City’s Mobility division](#). Though written outside the timeframe of this report, the letter helped advocate for funding for two additional senior planners, an outreach coordinator, bus and bike network planning, and mobility management for City and School employees in the FY21 City budget. PTAC has directly experienced the tremendous impacts

of this funding, both in our improved streets and in the City employees with whom we are fortunate to collaborate.

- *Spring 2021:* Letter supporting Somerville's application for the statewide Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Action Grant, to fund the Highland Avenue Sewer Separation & Streetscape Project (now the Highland Avenue Redesign Project).
- *November 2021:* Two letters ([one to State Representatives](#), [one to State Senator](#)) supporting proposed legislation that would allow cities and towns to install and operate road safety cameras to enforce traffic laws. Bills discussed in the letters include H. 2532, H. 2426, H. 2494, and S. 1545. Our Policy & Enforcement subcommittee continues to monitor the status of these bills.
- *July 2022:* [Letter offering recommendations on the initial proposed network of the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign](#). Many of the points emphasized in PTAC's letter were also included in Mayor Katjana Ballantyne's letter on the initial proposed network. This letter was the product of several committee meeting discussions held over the course of 2021-2022, and direct engagement with Somerville community members.
- *August 2022:* [Letter offering comments and concerns on the MBTA's Orange and northern Green Line shutdowns](#), considering short-, medium-, and long-term impacts. The letter also celebrated the City's rapid response, including the implementation of quick-build bus-only lanes along Orange Line shuttle bus routes.
- *September 2022:* [Letter supporting the City's response to the crash that killed cyclist Stephen Conley](#) with updated plans for Holland Street that include protected bike lanes on both sides of the street while maintaining pedestrian improvements and bus-priority infrastructure. PTAC also played an active role in the decision-making process that led to these updated plans, in collaboration with other community stakeholders and advocates.
- *December 2022:* [Letter offering recommendations on the revised network map of the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign](#). Most of the recommendations made in our July 2022 letter were ultimately adopted in the revised network map.

Endorsements

PTAC has passed four endorsements over the past two years to weigh in on pedestrian- and transit-related matters at the local level. Two of these endorsements express support

for other resident-based groups working towards safer and more accessible multimodal infrastructure in Somerville. PTAC is pleased to collaborate with these groups and elevate community voices beyond those of our own committee members.

- *July 2021:* Endorsed the Safe Streets Design Guide developed by the Somerville Alliance for Safe Streets (SASS). This guide describes and justifies 15 design interventions that support safe streets, along with their quick-build counterparts, and 13 design interventions that detract from street safety.
- *February 2022:* Endorsed the Somerville Commission for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD)'s recommendations on the City's January 2021 Outdoor Dining Draft Plan. The recommendations called for changes that would ensure access for people with disabilities within and around outdoor seating areas, including changes that would maintain open, non-hazardous paths of travel for those using mobility assistance devices.
- *August 2022:* Endorsed a set of policy priorities stemming from the Citywide Parking & Curb Use Study, based on the study's draft policy recommendations released in June 2022. PTAC had long been involved in this project, with our Vice Chair serving on the study's advisory group. After the Engineering & Evaluation and Policy & Enforcement subcommittees closely reviewed the Curb Profile and draft recommendations, and after two full committee discussions, PTAC voted to support the following policy priorities:
 - Increase the base parking permit price, with exceptions for low-income applicants and applicants with limited mobility options.
 - Reallocate curb space to increase and improve pedestrian, bus, and bike infrastructure, while prioritizing parking for users with accessibility needs and low-income users.
 - Streamline the permit application process and improve communications on parking permits and policies.
 - Prepare robust assessment protocol for any policy changes implemented, and experiment with other policies if ineffective or inequitable.
- *October 2022:* Endorsed Mobility's proposed designs for Western Washington Street.

Meeting Engagement

Throughout 2021-2022, PTAC welcomed nearly 60 guests to our monthly committee meetings, including Somerville community members, safe streets advocates, City employees, small business owners, and members of other City committees and boards. Several of these guests gave presentations on their work at PTAC's invitation (listed below). Our meetings on the MBTA Bus Network Redesign garnered the most guests, reflecting the high levels of community interest and engagement on this project.

- MBTA Bus Network Redesign
- Pearl Street resurfacing
- Powder House Circle redesign
- Snow clearing around pedestrian and transit infrastructure in Somerville
- Somerville IAM Engineering team 2022 update
- Somerville Partial Pavement program
- Somerville Shared Streets program
- Somerville's application to the statewide MVP Action Grant to fund the Highland Avenue Sewer Separation & Streetscape project (now the Highland Avenue Redesign project)
- Transit Matters' Mobility Hubs

Membership

In Fall 2021, PTAC welcomed eight new community representatives. These representatives were invited onto the committee following a thorough application review and interview process involving both ex-officio members and existing community representatives. PTAC also welcomed J.T. Scott, Ward 2 City Councilor, as a new ex-officio member following Katjana Ballantyne's departure to run a successful campaign for Mayor.

In Spring 2022, PTAC conducted elections for its three Officer positions. All positions were open, since the three incumbents were stepping down after two-year terms. The three candidates were elected unanimously, having run unopposed, and have successfully carried out the first change in leadership since PTAC's inception in January 2020. The former Officers provided crucial guidance and cooperation in this process. Two of PTAC's

new Officers were among the eight community representatives appointed in Fall 2021, taking on leadership positions about six months following their appointment. Notably, our new Vice Chair has innovated the role into that of Subcommittee Manager, providing support, guidance, and open communication channels to the leaders of PTAC's three subcommittees.

Subcommittee Reports

With subcommittee updates as a standing monthly agenda item, and with our Vice Chair's new subcommittee support role, PTAC's three subcommittees have built structure, cohesion, and capacity over the past two years.

Education & Engagement

The Education & Engagement subcommittee raises awareness of pedestrian- and transit-related City projects and plans to Somerville community members, hoping to encourage community feedback on relevant City initiatives.

In 2021-2022, Education & Engagement hosted two well-attended community walks. The first, held in August 2021 with Mobility's Adam Polinski, led a dozen community members around Powder House Circle in advance of the quick-build improvements planned for the area. The second, co-hosted with the Route 16 Traffic Calming Coalition, led about 40 community members along Alewife Brook Parkway to assess street safety - or lack thereof - in the area. Representative Christine Barber and Senator Pat Jehlen both spoke at the walk, and at least two Somerville City Councilors attended. The walk contributed to the approval of state funding for a traffic study of the intersection of Broadway and Alewife Brook Parkway.

Education & Engagement tabled at several community events during Summer and Fall 2022, including the Union Square Farmers Market, SomerStreets: Strike Up the Bands, SomerStreets: Monster Mash, and three Commuter Breakfasts at Whole Foods. At the former three events PTAC shared a table with Mobility, and at the latter we collaborated with the Somerville Bicycle Advisory Committee. PTAC members invited attendees to contribute a post-it note to a poster board asking, "What is your favorite place to walk in Somerville?" Education & Engagement created branded, informative postcards to distribute at the events, which SomerViva has since translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Nepali, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese. Every event provided an energizing opportunity to interact directly with community members, and many attendees took photos of the board to remember new places they could walk in Somerville.

Education & Engagement expanded PTAC’s digital communications with newly developed content on City platforms and a robust social media presence. PTAC’s page on the City website includes more detailed information about the committee, our bylaws, our first Annual Report, and PDF versions of the City Update presentations given at our monthly meetings. PTAC also periodically contributes a blurb on committee happenings to the monthly Mobility newsletter. Finally, the PTAC Twitter has been revitalized, with almost 650 followers and active engagement.

Engineering & Evaluation

The Engineering & Evaluation subcommittee reviews City infrastructure projects and plans to provide recommendations that center the interests of pedestrians and transit users, including those of community members with disabilities.

In 2021-2022, Engineering & Evaluation provided detailed recommendations on several City projects and plans, including:

- Assembly Square Neighborhood Plan
- Gilman Square Plan Implementation
- Intersection Redesign of Powder House Boulevard & Alewife Brook Parkway
- Pearl Street Reconstruction & Safety Improvements project
- School Street & Summer Street intersection
- Signal timing at intersection of Washington Street, Webster Avenue, and Somerville Avenue in Union Square
- Western Washington Street Mobility Improvements

Engineering & Evaluation also provided invaluable contributions to the committee discussions that informed PTAC’s letters and endorsements.

Policy & Enforcement

The Policy & Enforcement subcommittee explores policy areas of particular impact to pedestrians and transit users in Somerville, and makes policy-based recommendations to the City.

In 2021-2022, Policy & Enforcement led a successful bylaws amendment effort, ultimately adding a section on Opinions & Resolutions to the PTAC bylaws. The section encourages individual PTAC members to spearhead research and other efforts toward their own topics of interest, and to propose formal resolutions for vote by the full committee.

Policy & Enforcement devoted considerable effort to better understanding how snow clearing works in Somerville, and how to advocate for a more efficient snow clearance program. As part of these efforts, Policy & Enforcement reviewed the City's budget and regulations around snow clearance, including roles and responsibilities among City staff and contractors. In Winter 2021, during the first season of the Sidewalk Snow Clearing Pilot along Broadway and School Street, Policy & Enforcement led PTAC in taking photos of the areas after the first snowfall to assess the efficacy of the pilot.

Following PTAC's letters sent in Fall 2021, Policy & Enforcement continues to track the proposed legislation on automated enforcement as the bills move slowly through the State legislature.

Like Engineering & Evaluation, Policy & Enforcement provided critical contributions to the committee discussions that informed PTAC's letters and endorsements.

Looking Ahead to 2023

PTAC is eager to begin another year of work on making Somerville even more pedestrian- and transit-friendly. Our initial priorities for 2023 include:

- Pedestrian safety and access around the new GLX stations, including crosswalk availability, lighting, wayfinding, and the integration of the Community Path Extension.
- Children's safety including Safe Routes to School initiatives.
- Navigating the roles and responsibilities of enforcement within Somerville's Vision Zero framework.

Beyond these priorities, we hope to:

- Planning community walks around project areas and to promote Neighborway usage.
- Advocating for additional improvements to the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign including a high-frequency 90 along Highland Ave, increased service in the Mystic Ave neighborhood, and options for north-south travel including potential micro-mobility pilots.
- Continuing to monitor the City's Snow Clearing Pilot.
- Developing a rubric for evaluating projects and plans.
- Learning from the City's Transit Benefits Programs.
- Providing feedback on the Silver Line Extension Alternatives Analysis.
- Pushing to extend the GLX to Route 16.
- Providing PTAC as a platform for a more diverse range of identities and experiences in Somerville, whether through membership or other forms of engagement.

Of course, the world of safe streets can be vast and unpredictable, so our committee looks forward to tackling issues and opportunities as they arise throughout the year.

How to Get Involved

Join PTAC

PTAC periodically solicits applications for membership and submits recommendations for appointment to the Mayor. Additionally, community members may apply to join Somerville PTAC through the following process:

- Attend a minimum of six monthly committee meetings in a two-year period, and actively participate in other committee activities.
- Declare interest in becoming a member at a monthly committee meeting, and obtain the endorsement of the current membership through a simple majority vote. The current membership will then submit their recommendation for appointment to the Mayor.
- Write a letter to the Mayor, expressing interest in becoming a member and detailing any relevant experience.
- If appointed by the Mayor, arrange a time with the City Clerk to be officially sworn in as a member.

Make Your Voice Heard

- Give feedback on City projects and plans on SomerVoice (voice.somervillema.gov)
- Request a specific improvement or report a problem via Somerville 311 (somervillema.gov/311 and 617-666-3311)
- Discuss City plans and policies with PTAC at our committee meetings, every third Thursday of the month (somervillema.gov/ptac)
- Stay informed about pedestrian and transit issues in Somerville
 - Mobility Division newsletter (somervillema.gov/mobility)
 - PTAC Twitter (twitter.com/SomervillePTAC)